

Jeremy Corbyn's National Security Council

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During the election campaign, I looked at two salient national security issues: [whether to expect a Russian information operation to influence the outcome of the election](#) and [what Jeremy Corbyn's impact might be on UK national security policies](#).

One week on from the election, I argue in this blog that, in the uncertain context of ongoing talks between the Conservative and the Democratic Unionist parties, the Labour party should begin serious preparations to undertake the national security responsibilities of government at an unprecedentedly early stage in the electoral cycle.

With the parlous parliamentary position of Prime Minister Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn can credibly talk about [preparing Labour for the prospect of re-entering government](#). Whilst the 'preparation for government' strand of work usually intensifies at a much later stage of the electoral cycle, the uncertainty caused by Mrs May's surprise election and its unexpected outcome should encourage Mr Corbyn to continue his effort to project himself as a credible alternative prime minister, charming and disarming his national security critics.

From a national security perspective, encompassing joined-up thinking about foreign policy, defence, development, domestic security and resilience, what should Corbyn do to signal his preparedness to govern? If I were in a position to advise him, I would highlight five factors for successful preparation to assume the national security responsibilities of being prime minister: people, processes, policies, presentation and pace. I would also recommend some concrete steps to structure an alternative approach to national security, including: the recruitment of a national security adviser; the configuration of a national security cluster in the Shadow Cabinet; a decision about whether and under what circumstances Mr Corbyn should commit to retaining the National Security Council (NSC) apparatus; and the immediate commissioning of an

alternative national security strategy, to articulate the underlying principles of a Labour approach to national security and to review the security-related impact of Brexit.

Some might counsel Mr Corbyn to be as quiet as possible about national security and instead steer the political agenda onto other issues. But, collectively, these measures would represent both a statesmanlike response to the challenges of being a prime minister-in-waiting and a shrewd political intervention to address decisively the continuing criticism of his national security credentials.

People

It might be tempting to jump straight into questions about policies and strategy, but the most important issue for a presumptive leader to address is who to appoint to key positions. Getting the right personnel in place is crucial, as is the development of a clear sense of how the leader intends to use these people. There are some structural factors that will shape good decision making about personnel: (1) prospective advisers need to offer wise counsel and, ideally, subject-matter expertise (it helps here if advisers are recruited with relevant career experience in foreign affairs and security issues, and from a pool beyond that narrowly constrained by active party membership); the leader needs to exercise good judgement in recruitment, and should be willing to take advice from a broad church in selecting the right people; (2) the leader needs to be able to trust advisers and, if a close and effective working relationship doesn't already exist between them, the prospective advisers need to be able to gel with the leader and the leader's existing team, but this factor has an important caveat: leaders shouldn't undermine the advisory process by creating an 'echo chamber' or 'group think' environment, in which everyone thinks the same way and no-one is prepared to offer challenging advice to the leader. Down this road lies trouble, as Theresa May arguably found with her election manifesto.

It takes dedicated effort to ensure that the advisory process runs smoothly and channels multiple perspectives to shape high-quality advice and recommendations for the leader and Shadow frontbenchers. To that end, Mr Corbyn should recruit a national security

adviser, not only to provide foreign, defence and security advice to Corbyn himself, but also to manage the people, processes and structures that shape that advice. Such an adviser would have to wear several hats simultaneously, equally adept at advising Corbyn, winning the respect and trust of Shadow frontbenchers as an ‘honest broker’ within the system, guaranteeing that no-one’s voice is neglected, and also in managing the secretariat of advisers and researchers supporting the Shadow Cabinet, as well as outreach work to the communities of national security expertise within and beyond the wider party, including those unable or unwilling to commit to more formal engagements with the party.

There are several possible models for such a recruit. They could, for example, be a suitably-qualified MP – Dan Jarvis might be one possibility – or else an expert from outside of the House of Commons, such as a Labour peer or similar figure with diplomatic or military expertise, or another similarly well-credentialed, ‘late career’ professional. Alternatively, Mr Corbyn could look beyond Westminster and Whitehall, to an academic or (perhaps unlikely) a private sector security specialist. The key is to identify someone with the right blend of credibility, expertise and flexibility to juggle the different responsibilities of the role and to establish the necessary working relationships.

Processes

Recruiting the right people is a *sine qua non* for effective preparation for government, but it is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition of success: with poor processes, even high-calibre personnel can fail. And even the most perfectly-designed processes can fail, especially if leaders are unwilling to embrace them and ensure that advisers and other actors similarly abide by them. Everyone needs to know who is responsible for what, how lines of reporting should operate, and that the integrity of the process will be enforced and upheld from the top.

Opposition is fast-paced, reactive and demands that politicians do more, with less support than when in government, most notably without access to the vast supporting machinery of advice and expertise provided by the civil service. This puts even more of

a premium on good organisation and processes, to optimise outcomes with scarce input resources. There is also an emerging body of good work to draw on in opposition, for example the Institute for Government's [long-running work supporting politicians from different political parties to prepare for government](#).

Opposition is also a good opportunity to commission reviews, especially reviews that the government itself has decided not to undertake. For example, Mr Corbyn should instruct his national security adviser to review the structures and track-record of the NSC since 2010, including [the role of the national security adviser](#), with a view to informing a clear, public decision taken by Mr Corbyn about whether, as prime minister, to retain, reform or replace the NSC and its supporting machinery. Such a move would both be good in itself (there are important questions about how the national security secretariat could be improved, both in the options it presents to ministers and in the breadth of experiences and depth of expertise it recruits to fill its positions) and an important signal that Mr Corbyn takes seriously the business of preparing to assume the national security responsibilities incumbent on prime ministers, including creating an open process to reach out to expertise beyond his close circle and even the wider party.

Another dimension of this effort should be for Mr Corbyn to make maximum use of existing opportunities to access the official national security machinery. For example, as a Privy Counsellor, Mr Corbyn is entitled to receive briefings of classified intelligence; he should take every opportunity to receive such briefings and integrate them in his preparation to become prime minister. Separately, Mr Corbyn should lobby, both privately and publicly, for the prime minister to invite him to attend NSC meetings that involve issues of clear, cross-party strategic significance for the UK. Such meetings have historically been rare, *ad hoc*, and on the initiative of No.10, but Mr Corbyn should seize the initiative and indicate an eager readiness to participate.

Mr Corbyn should also commission another review from his national security adviser: the Labour party should produce an alternative national security strategy, articulating the Labour perspective for an alternative conception of national security, and explicitly addressing the impact of Brexit on UK domestic security, diplomacy, military and

provision of development assistance. This would constitute the central focus of policy development, and offer a structured starting point for national security planning during a possible future election campaign.

Such an endeavour might be criticised as being politically naïve, presenting an opportunity for the government to attack the resulting document, subverting the traditional dynamic in which it is the opposition party which criticises the substantive policies and strategies created by government. But this is a shallow objection, one that misses the deeper benefit to the nation of an opposition party undertaking constructive, substantive efforts to develop a coherent approach to national security. There is also an obvious political pay-off for Mr Corbyn, in his quest to overturn long-standing preconceptions about his shortcomings on national security issues. And strategic development could embrace Mr Corbyn's stated preference for open, collaborative processes, soliciting the active participation of party members and supporters.

In the two [National Security strategies produced under the Conservative-Liberal coalition and majority Conservative administrations since May 2010](#), the underlying principles of UK policy have been consistently articulated as protecting the UK, projecting its power and influence overseas, including by promoting UK values abroad and bringing prosperity to the UK economy. At such a high level, the articulation of such principles gives readers little sense of how decisions are taken in practice, especially in circumstances of trade-offs between two or more of these principles, for example, in the promotion of UK values when this conflicts with the prosperity imperative to win foreign contracts for British companies. The importance of strategic development and the identification of such principles is that it provides a context in which clear policy goals can be determined and specific means chosen to pursue them.

The Labour party manifesto has already signalled the party's commitment to make different decisions in such cases, for example by advocating an embargo on arms shipments to Saudi Arabia due to the humanitarian impact of the Saudi military intervention in Yemen. It is easy to imagine that Mr Corbyn's conception of what Robin Cook famously described as [a foreign policy with 'an ethical dimension'](#) would be

markedly different from that conceived by Mrs May and prime ministers of the recent past.

Mr Corbyn's election address on foreign policy, [delivered at Chatham House](#), was a first step in articulating this alternative approach, including a scepticism about elective foreign interventions that goes with the grain of current national sentiments. To pursue this issue in a broader, deeper context as part of an integrated national security review would enable Mr Corbyn to highlight a serious commitment by the Labour party to prepare a coherent programme for government at a time when the current Conservative government's freedom of action on foreign policy and military intervention has been undermined by Mrs May's self-inflicted reduction of her parliamentary mandate and the distraction of all-consuming negotiations over Brexit.

In opposition more generally, the major national security-related process questions facing Leaders of the Opposition relate less to preparing for government and more to the assembling of the relevant parts of the Shadow Cabinet, configuration of advisory roles and the flow of information and decision-making within the party. There is already a formal structure of policy-making within the party itself, as well as Shadow Cabinet-wide processes.

But there is also an opportunity to shape the national security process in opposition so that it more closely aligns with and prepares for practices inside government. For example, collaboration between the foreign affairs, defence, development and other relevant portfolios (*e.g.* domestic security and surveillance aspects of the home affairs brief, and resilience aspects of the energy and environment briefs) could be fostered at the levels of Shadow frontbenchers and political advisers by creating formal national security clusters. These clusters could be underpinned by regular meetings and collaborative position-taking, perhaps chaired by Mr Corbyn or his national security adviser, and drawing on external expertise to brief the senior team and help them to shape the party's response to national security issues. As I have [argued elsewhere](#), a more deliberative, open approach doesn't guarantee better decisions, but it's much less likely to

fall foul of the pathologies that can afflict decisions made by small, insular groups with imperfect information in conditions of uncertainty.

At the supporting level, this cluster should be serviced by a secretariat comprising co-located political advisers and research staff from across the relevant frontbench teams. Supporting staff should not be balkanised or siloed into individual teams, comprising separate fiefdoms of individual Shadow frontbenchers, but should instead collaborate under collective, and yes, even centralised leadership (again under the auspices of Mr Corbyn's national security adviser), to ensure that coherence and synergies are created, that no issue drops between two or more stools, and that the unforced errors of 'mixed messages' and confused communications are eliminated. Both policy advice and communications should be integrated into a coherent whole (a Shadow National Security Secretariat), which would lead to better outcomes than independent, parallel lines, especially with the inevitable resource constraints of opposition. An engrained habit of close cooperation would improve subsequent cross-departmental relations once in government, when Shadow teams immediately disperse across Whitehall and are quickly engulfed in their respective departmental bureaucracies. If good habits aren't already deeply entrenched, relapse into decision-making pathologies is all the more likely.

Policies

Once the right people and processes are in place, policy development can commence with alacrity. I covered some of these issues in a [pre-election blog about Mr Corbyn's possible impact on national security policies](#). At the risk of offering heretical advice, Mr Corbyn might learn a lesson from the Conservative party. In fact, I have *already* offered this advice above, when recommending that Corbyn should commission an alternative national security strategy. Whilst in opposition, David Cameron [commissioned a similar review as part of a wider effort to shape a future agenda for his party in government](#). This process generated plans that shaped Mr Cameron's 2010 national security reforms.

Structured policy planning, bringing in as many relevant internal and external perspectives as possible, and overseen by a designated review chairperson, is a good idea,

but it can also be a lengthy, inflexible process. Such a process would be potentially unhelpful and cumbersome if a snap election were caused by the collapse of Mrs May's government. The key, therefore, is to keep policy development processes sufficiently adaptable and agile, for example by producing shorter, intermediate outputs to faster time-frames, thereby providing the infrastructure necessary to feed into a surprise election campaign.

The party would not, of course, be starting from an entirely blank slate next time, as policy development work was on-going before the recent general election campaign, and had produced positions on the renewal of the UK's independent nuclear deterrent, as well as its distinctive position on arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and a more unambiguously challenging approach than Theresa May's to the Special Relationship with the US in the Age of Trump. Viewing national security policies holistically, the party can identify areas for cross-portfolio scrutiny, such as the public and private sector risks posed by cyber-attacks, the need for a clear position on collective defence on NATO's eastern flanks, and prospects for [a more coherent and effective UK policy towards the manifold threats posed by Russia](#).

Presentation

Policy development in opposition, and the personnel and processes that support this effort, are necessarily constrained by resource scarcity to a far greater extent than political parties face when in government. Mr Corbyn does not yet have the support of a Prime Minister's Office and other government departments to help him to shape national security policies. Given the importance to the nation of solid preparatory work undertaken by political parties during opposition, there is a valid national security argument that more public funds should be invested in facilitating such work. Even within existing capacity restraints, however, more could be done to improve its effectiveness. This capacity gap is all the more significant given that Corbyn's perceived weakness on national security issues was a persistent line of political attack by the Conservative party and its media supporters both during and even long before the election campaign. Of course, the continuing fall-out from the election has probably

blunted the impact of Conservative cries of ‘coalition of chaos,’ in light of the elaborate dance between the Conservatives and Democratic Unionists, and its implications for the [integrity of the UK government’s role in the Northern Ireland political process](#). Irrespective of all this, a leader of the opposition has the opportunity to make several symbolic decisions that signal preparedness to address these issues.

In this light, there is a clear presentational imperative for Mr Corbyn to announce the creation of a national security adviser and related structures, and then to imbue this process with a vigorous sense of momentum (no pun intended) by personally engaging with it. Mr Corbyn’s process, largely devoid of access to classified material, can also afford to be considerably more open and transparent than Mrs May’s, so an additional presentational advantage is afforded by the possibility of publicising Mr Corbyn’s efforts to project the appearance and reality of credible, structured national security preparations for government. This could be in the form of releasing the agenda for meetings, publishing intermediate and annual outputs, like policy position papers and the alternative national security strategy. Committing to a disciplined process of creating a publicly-available national security strategy, including a related process of review and revision in consultation with party stakeholders and external experts, would be a major step in signalling the party’s preparedness for government and Mr Corbyn’s personally greater stature and credibility in national security issues, as he seeks to present himself as a plausible prime minister-in-waiting.

Pace

Finally, it should be emphasised that recruitment, review and reform of the party’s processes and policies will inevitably take time. With the equivocal outcome of the election, and uncertain future of a minority Conservative administration, time is quite possibly in short supply. Again with a nod to presentational factors, it is important for Mr Corbyn to signal clearly, decisively and swiftly that action is being taken to prepare for government.

A transitional arrangement should be put into motion in the next few weeks, recruiting a trusted team to produce a blueprint and timetable for recruiting staff and implementing this reformed approach to national security issues. This transition process could itself learn from the experience, in a different but related context, of [US presidential transition teams](#), including what makes for successful and failed transition processes.

During election campaigns, opposition parties are [afforded access talks with the civil service](#) to prepare for the potentiality of government. Outside of election campaigns, opportunities for such contact are severely limited, which is why Mr Corbyn should make the most of what opportunities he has as a privy counsellor. But political parties in opposition can still take seriously their responsibilities to prepare for the challenges they would inherit in government. There are better and worse ways in which to do this. Learning from history, relevant comparative experiences and the research literature, assembling an experienced and effective team, and implementing necessary reviews and reforming internal processes, are all ways in which Mr Corbyn can signal quickly to the electorate, and indeed to the civil service, that his rhetoric about preparing an alternative government is matched by a practical commitment to putting the groundwork in place.